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McNell case intrigues Maine town

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BRIDGTON, Maine — The whole thing, townspeople say, is a page out of a macabre mystery story that could have been written by former resident Stephen King.

It has all the elements: Two mysterious fires, the second of which leveled a glass and stone lakeside vacation home once owned by a high-level CIA executive; the death of a wealthy New York businessman; and, finally, a court battle this week that ended with an exhumation order to find out if the businessman actually died of natural causes or was murdered.

The story of the relationship between the McNell family of New York and Max Hugel, the recently-deposed CIA chief of clandestine operations, has wended its way from Wall Street and Washington's inner circles to this small, lake-studded western-Maine tourist community 38 miles northwest of Portland.

Hugel, a New Hampshire businessman, resigned his CIA post in mid-July. But he continues to deny allegations made by the dead man's two brothers that he illegally channeled inside information to them about his sewing machine and typewriter distribution company and paid them money to trade stock in that firm.

After those allegations were made public by the Washington Post on July 14, the two brothers — Thomas R. and Samuel F. McNell Jr. — disappeared with more than \$3 million in assets from two of their firms. They currently are being sought by the FBI, whose search has included several trips to Bridgton where the McNell family has maintained shorefront property on Long Lake for three generations.

On June 1, about one week after the McNell brothers first contacted the Post about the alleged stock manipulations, their younger brother Dennis, 41, a vice president in a family firm, died in a New York City hospital as doctors were preparing to perform surgery for a suspected ruptured spleen.

Dennis was buried here June 3 in the McNell family plot in the Forest Hills Cemetery Annex on Kansas road, a mile outside the town center. It is his body that a New York district attorney wanted ex-

humed for an autopsy. Medical authorities say a ruptured spleen frequently results from a traumatic external injury. According to press reports, the FBI has been told by a former business associate that McNell had been abducted and beaten twice this year, allegedly in connection with the brothers' dealings with Hugel.

However, the physician who treated McNell the night he died in a Queens hospital has said McNell was suffering from severe cirrhosis of the liver and living "on borrowed time."

Two state judges in Maine yesterday overruled family objections to the exhumation and McNell's body was transported to Augusta for an autopsy by New York City Chief Medical Examiner Elliot Gross.

Gross reportedly performed the autopsy last night but, according to the Associated Press, Thomas Russo, chief of homicide investigations for the Queens, N.Y. district attorney's office, said no immediate statements about the examination would be made.

The exhumation had been delayed by attempts by a Portland lawyer, John Whitman, representing the McNell family, to have the court stop the action. Superior Court Judge Donald Alexander ruled, however, that there was "reason to suspect that Dennis McNell's death was the result of violence... while he was in a state of apparent good health."

Peter Oberg took it all in this week from his Main street insurance and real estate office and offered that "it's big-time intrigue for a small town like ours."

Indeed, it was enough to set imaginations running rampant at the cemetery where some 50 year-round and summer residents had gathered to witness the exhumation.

"I still think it's not his body in there," one woman speculated at the cemetery. A Massachusetts resident who spends each summer here, she refused to give her name, indicating she didn't want to get involved in what many people here were saying this week is "something fishy."

"And then, the day of the funeral (for Dennis), there was that big limousine with the dark glass so you couldn't see who was in it. When it went through town, everybody noticed," she adds.

"This town is so small," says a year-round resident who also declined to be identified, "that if you usually buy a chocolate ice cream cone every day and one day buy a vanilla one, every-